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Lesbian Religious History: Highlights in the Low Lights

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I offer warm thanks to Mark Bowman for his outstanding leadership in developing the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual Religious Archives Network. I am privileged to serve on the Advisory Board. I am also grateful to Chicago Theological Seminary, and especially to its president, Susan Thistlethwaite, for her supportive leadership. The distinguished faculty here, including Janet Parker and Laurel Schneider, to mention just a few, make this a “happening” place in theological education.

I was sorry to miss this occasion last fall when I had to cancel my talk due to a death in my family. Melissa Wilcox stepped in so gracefully that I only wish I had been here to hear her and Morris Floyd. I hope we can pick up on the conversation they started as we explore together my topic tonight, “Lesbian Religious History: Highlights in the Low Lights.”

Let me begin by saying why this topic is of such moment for me. Then I will flesh out, as it were, an unexplored area of our field, namely, lesbian women’s experiences. I will conclude with three questions that I hope will invite discussion. Given that we have such a limited amount of time I have elected to confine my remarks and examples largely to the Christian tradition that I know best, hoping to hear similar reports on other traditions in the future.

1. Why this topic “Lesbian Religious History: Highlights in the Low Lights”

I am writing a book entitled *Same-Sex Love and American Religion* for the Contemporary American Religion Series of Columbia University Press. While doing the research I was struck over and over again by the degree to which so much of what has been chronicled, not necessarily so much of what has been done, but so much of what has been written down and taken seriously, on homosexuality and religion has been done by men. I think of the Metropolitan Community Church, the founding of Dignity, Integrity, Affirmations and the like, most of which are stories of men gathering to oppose heterosexist religious teachings. I am deeply respectful of this work, but I think it is time we broaden the picture, and see where and why women were working somewhat differently.

There are lots of reasons for these differences, not the least of which is that religion, especially Christianity which has been the dominant force in this country thus far, was a male preserve until quite recently. The same is true for theological education, ecumenical agencies and church bureaucracies until rather recently, and, in some cases, until today. Most major US denominations have yet to have their first woman president or presiding officer even as the number of women in ministry increases.

I was further motivated to think about these issues when I began writing some articles on lesbians in religion, starting with an essay entitled “Lesbian and Bisexual Issues in Religion” for Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller’s forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*. I realized that one major difference between lesbian and gay work has been that women’s theological work has focused on deep changes, not simply on cosmetic ones, not just adding lgbtq people and stirring the religious pot, but actually changing the way we think about religion at the core of our traditions. For example, Mary Daly’s challenge to the gender of the divine—“If God is male, the male is God”- still reverberates in every religious nook and cranny, and Carter Heyward’s “redemption of God,” whether God wanted or needed to be redeemed or not, was and remains a bold move.

Contrast this, with all due respect, with my beloved John McNeill’s work, to take but one example of mainline gay men. Last year at Pacific School of Religion John gave his materials to the archive there that bears his name and that of his lover, Charles Chiarelli. I presented a lecture on his marvelous contribution to our common life. I entitled it “More Catholic Than Thou,” characterizing his work as “one, holy, catholic and apostolic” (giving my own definition to each of those of course) as a way of locating it squarely in the Catholic tradition. While John reflects brilliantly on his own experience, his neo-thomistic form, and, by and large, the theological content of his work is perfectly consistent with traditional Catholic teachings on Jesus, the Church, God and other major issues, save his strong and spirited defense of same-sex love as grace-filled and holy.

John McNeill, like Troy Perry, Mark Jordan, Chris Glaser and any number of other gay men whose writings and activism have shaped our field simply have not shaken the Christian tradition at its roots on matters other than same-sex love. I do not mean to minimize their contribution. Changing the default Christian assumptions around same-sex love is a major accomplishment, still unfinished, but well underway. Rather, I want to point out that some of the women have challenged the very foundations of patriarchal Christianity far more broadly. For example, Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker in their classic essay “For God So Loved the World?” asked whether the doctrine of the Atonement was in fact divine legitimization for child abuse. They shook the foundations and opened discussion that rages today on a central tenet of the faith.

Of course one could point out exceptions to this generalization. I think immediately of Christian de la Huerta and Q-Spirit with the rave masses, which admittedly push the envelope. But in my research on women I began to appreciate anew the groundbreaking work that has encompassed concern with same sex love, but in so many instances moved beyond it. My own work on friendship for example, is not for lesbian women only I propose that friendship not marriage might better be the basis for mature adult relationships, including same-sex ones. This tosses the proverbial monkey wrench into the lgbtq pro-marriage lobby, but results in richer more radical conversation on what it is we are about, even if we do end up having to get married like everyone else.

I was further confirmed in the importance of lesbian feminist work in religion when I was asked to write entries on Mary Daly and Beverly Wildung Harrison for the *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality, Religion and American Culture*. In Daly’s entry, for example, I wrote,

“Mary Daly created new intellectual and spiritual space for thinking about women and religion... Mary Daly is a Lesbian who expanded the meaning of the word. She came out in the early 1970s, spoke publicly then about her sexual identity, and later wrote about the inadequacy of male-defined terms for same-sex love. In her imaginative lexicon, *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language* (1987), which she wrote “in cahoots with Jane Caputi,” she defined “Lesbian” (always with a capital ‘L’) as “a Woman-Loving woman; a woman who has broken the Terrible Taboo against Women-Touching women on *all* levels...rejected false loyalties to men in every sphere” (p. 78).

She never confined the idea of Lesbian to merely a sexual reduction of the term. Rather, she saw it as a description, indeed as encouragement for women to bond with one another, to break with patriarchal practices. At the same time, she appreciated, enjoyed and loved women in every way and dimension, including the sexual. But her focus was always on “The Fire of Female Friendship,” the “Gyn/affection” that is the source of strong feminist energy and a catalyst for feminist social change.

Mary Daly rejects male-dominated gay liberation and insists on women being protagonists regardless of their sexual partners. She rejects transgender options as a reinforcement of stereotypic sex roles. She lives out her commitments in the company of women friends and with the assurance that new ways of being are possible.”

I am in the process of writing the same sort of entry on Beverly Wildung Harrison, the mother of feminist ethics. I am confident that I will be able to say on close reading of her texts, that she, too, had more than a change in sexual ethics in mind. Her emphasis on class, race and gender as operative and interstructured categories of oppression provided a contextual grounding for her work on sexuality that simply is not there in early gay male work.

One more example of this phenomenon of women shaking the foundations is Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, a graduate of Bob Jones University who wrote, with Letha Scanzoni, the classic text, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* Not only did she discover her neighbor, but also herself, going on to shock her evangelical sisters by writing such lesbian-focused books as *Sensuous Spirituality*. But the real earth shattering work was to follow in her recent *Omni-Gender: A Trans-Religious Approach*, in which she burst all of our bubbles by arguing that transgender people destabilize all gender categories. So our carefully worked out sense of what it means to be gay/lesbian, even bisexual, and our theo-political strategies to bring about inclusion in religions and society are all subject to reconsideration. Leave it to the dykes to shake the foundations.

Again, I am not putting the men’s work down, simply lifting up this salient highlight of women’s work to demonstrate its unique importance. If we don’t, our history will be incomplete and misleading. It is not that women were not part of the formation of intellectual and activist movements to transform heterosexist religions, but that women were, for the most part, doing it differently.

2. An unexplored area of our field, namely, lesbian women’s experiences

This leads me to think ever more specifically about the women themselves who shaped our early thinking on these questions. Let me highlight (in the low lights) several women examples of the

people raising the issues I am confronting in trying to capture the importance of what lesbian women have contributed to religion.

Let me begin in a personal vein—speaking of low lights—to give you a sense of where I came into this story. In 1972, I went to Harvard Divinity School where feminism was beginning to take hold. Mary Daly and her friends were around—she taught then at Boston College that was connected to Harvard through the Boston Theological Institute, a theological consortium. I was young (21 years old) and not very savvy on feminist matters. But it was all in the air in those days. *Beyond God the Father* came out in 1973, and so did many of us! I recall vividly the morning after my first trip to a women’s bar—or women’s night at some watering hole in Boston, I can’t recall. In any case, I ran into someone in Harvard Square who said how glad she was that we had all been there the night before. I remember thinking to myself how rapidly the word got out. She said, “It’s about time the Divinity School women came out dancing.” We thought so too.

Around the same time, 1972-73, I came into possession of what I now think of as an artifact of sorts in our field, a mimeographed copy of Sally Miller Gearhart’s famous essay, “The Lesbian and God-the-Father Or All the Church Needs is a Good Lay—On Its Side.” It is the first contemporary lesbian theological reflection of which I am aware. I don’t know who gave it to me; I only remember reading it with awe on a bus between Boston and Syracuse, NY, where I was going home on vacation.

Sally delivered it as a lecture in February 1972 at a pastors’ conference at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California. When she tried to publish the essay, the Program Agency of the United Presbyterian Church turned down the article for obvious reasons of prejudice. Happily, the Philadelphia Task Force on Women in Religion published it as a pink supplement to *Genesis III*, their feminist newsletter edited by Nancy Krody, a longtime lesbian activist.

Sally Gearhart’s piece was passed hand to hand in mimeographed form, amazing readers who simply had not dealt with such issues in a religious context. She claimed, “I cannot separate the lesbian from the woman,” a clear affirmation of the need to leave aside male definitions and an invitation to all women to identify themselves on their own terms (p. 1). She went on to affirm, “being a lesbian involves for me some growing political consciousness. That means I am committed to assessing institutions like the church, which, as far as most women are concerned, takes the prize as the most influential and in itself the most insidiously oppressive institution in Western society” (p. 2).

Gearhart, a Methodist turned Lutheran who eventually left Christianity altogether, set the pace for lesbian and later bisexual women to reject privatized, individualized analysis. All did not, of course. But she encouraged women to embrace an explicitly theo-political agenda. She co-edited with William R. Johnson an early book in the field that included her essay, “The Miracle of Lesbianism.” Indeed it was against great odds that she and her friends came out, even in the seeming safety of feminist circles. Lesbian women were encouraged to keep their sexual identity quiet lest all feminists be labeled “lesbian.” Sally Gearhart was not to be silenced. “The love that dares not speak its name” until then had been associated with men in religious settings. Thanks to Sally Gearhart, it now had a beautiful female face.

I went from Harvard to Berkeley for graduate studies in 1974 and met Sally Gearhart. She was a powerful experience! She regaled us with tales of teaching in a conservative Christian college where the president asked her if she were a lesbian. When she demurred, she reported that Jesus on the crucifix behind the president's desk winked at her. I recall a memorable night with her when she taught a group of young seminary women some lesbian-themed church hymns that followed her lusty renditions of "I enjoy being a dyke" to the tune of "I enjoy being a girl," "There is nothing like a dyke" to the tune of "There is nothing like a dame." You get the flavor!

Sally Gearhart, like Mary Daly, left Christianity long ago in favor of Goddess and earth-centered religion. She wrote science fiction (*The Wanderground*) and rarely in recent years has trifled with the churches. Nonetheless, she left an indelible mark on me and on many others who crossed her path. She was part of a CLOUT (Christian Lesbians Out) event in the Bay Area now probably ten years ago. I can report that she remains the heartthrob of many a feminist theologian.

Sally Gearhart is an easy case to "excavate." She was out and about for years ahead of the rest of us. She was in the classic film "The Word is Out." But naming women "lesbian" or "bisexual" is a delicate matter, especially in the homohating church world where the price is still high. Recall the Rev. Joan Clark's courageous "coming out" in the magazine *Christianity and Crisis* and how dearly she paid for her honesty.

Historians do not agree about what constitutes a "lesbian" or "bisexual" woman, especially in cases where women did not use these words about themselves. Does it mean a woman who has sexual relations with another woman? Does it include women whose primary affection is for women regardless of sexual behavior? For example, one well-known pioneer in feminist theology from the mid-twentieth century was known to live for decades with a woman friend, probably a lover. They never acknowledged the nature of their relationship, undoubtedly because they did not have categories in their time that explained it positively. Honesty would have cost them their livelihood. The *New York Times* was not in the habit of listing "companions" who survived. Were they lesbians?

Another prominent late twentieth century churchwoman who wrote extensively and worked on the ordination of women in her denomination was known to fall in love with women. Again, circumstances, including racism in her case, simply made the cost of candor too high. Was she a lesbian? How about nuns who vow celibacy? Surely their sexual preference need not be expressed physically for them to claim themselves lesbian or bisexual. How are they to be understood? Convent life has long had its own women-identified social and cultural set that begs feminist analysis.

Still another one of my feminist theological foresters went about her personal life quietly though most people assumed she was a lesbian. Now that she is dead, her family is guarding her privacy, more likely, their privacy, making it hard to know much less to say much about her. Pillars of the church like Methodist Jeanne Audrey Powers and Presbyterian Peggy Cleveland who have come out later in life after long years of Church work from the closet have wisdom to contribute on the remarkable tenacity of lesbian women in the face of patriarchal injustice.

Such cases show that the question “Is she or isn’t she?” is wrong since a “yes” or “no” answer does not explain much. Rather, one can say, “I hope so,” trusting that a patriarchal culture makes women’s love for one another so difficult that its triumph is something to be encouraged. In the historical cases, one can say that these women paved the way, even in secret, for those who followed them. A generation of scholars beginning in the 1970s assumed the theo-political task of reflecting on their lesbian/bisexual experiences producing what is now a growing body of literature, people like Carter Heyward, Irene Monroe and Elizabeth Stuart. Many lesbian women in the church bureaucracies funded and otherwise supported lesbian efforts both within and beyond the institutions. It is a proud history, a rich story waiting to be told in detail.

3. Let me close with three questions that I hope will invite discussion

I am struck by three nagging questions as I go through the material about our history and as I reflect on the lives of individual lesbian and bisexual women. First, why is it that women and men have taken such different approaches to these matters? Feminism would seem to be the obvious answer—an analysis of and commitment to overcome the myriad forms of oppression that women and dependent children face. I have long maintained that the reason why most denominational lgbtq groups were male-dominated for so long was because for gay men the primary contradiction was being gay, everything else being rather congenial in the men’s clubs called churches. Whereas for women the primary contradiction is being a woman in a man’s church, and for lesbian women there was an added contradiction around sexuality. This has resulted in much closer ties between lesbian and heterosexual women than between many gay men and their straight brothers. But what am I missing here? What else is at stake?

A second question has to do with what I perceive to be the impact, or more precisely, the seeming lack of impact, of lesbian women’s work on gay men. Surely many men have their own copies of Sally Gearhart’s work, have read Mary Daly and Carter Heyward. But has this work really made a difference in the rank and file gay male? Is there openness to consider the divine in female terms and/or in the plural? Do biblically based Christian lgbtq people, especially gay men, understand why some of us are less than enthusiastic about Jesus and his many stories, more interested in goddesses and nature religions?

I do not mean to suggest we need a monolithic approach to these hard questions. Rather, I mean to signal what I consider to be a tendency in our work to compartmentalize. Conservatives simply brand this stuff as heresy—for example, the Re-Imagining Conference and the entire flap surrounding it that had an anti-lesbian subtext. But liberal gay men can be just as unhelpful by letting lesbians do their thing and not allowing it, not needing it to permeate the basic structures of churches and lgbtq religious groups.

This dynamic is obvious in the struggle for ordination in many denominations. Even though feminists have been critiquing the hierarchical, exclusivist approaches to ordination that set clergy apart, give them special powers and decision-making privileges, the struggle for lgbtq ordination is precisely to get into the institutions as they are. But it misses the fact that feminists have argued that ordination itself needs to be rethought. My question again, why has our work been largely ignored?

Finally, I am intrigued by the histories I began to recount—the lives and loves of lesbian women who paid a high price for the bit of freedom and respect we enjoy. I struggle to imagine respectful ways to recapture their histories that will make our work more inclusive. I seek to understand, for example, the complicated ways in which racial/ethnic factors have kept women in the closet, the degree to which economic privilege permitted some women to live well despite their sexual “transgressions,” the role age plays in determining how and when women come out.

Answers to these problems can help us to craft future strategies that will make more options available to more people at a lower personal cost. Otherwise, I fear my historical incursions may simply add data without strategic wisdom. It is strategic wisdom that I am trying to mine here so that future generations will not have to suffer and pay the price that many of our foremothers paid, however willing they were to do so for love.

I welcome your insights and comments, your inquiries as to what else took place when the lights were low and the feminist theological girls went out to dance.